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BF 455
F 595



AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

The Journal of Expression

SEPTEMBER, NINETEEN THIRTY

SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF BLINDNESS AS INDICATED BY SPEECH DISORDERS

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(A paper read at the Eastern Public Speaking Conference, Princeton, New Jersey, April, 1930, the material for which is derived from the writer's unpublished thesis for Master's Degree, at Pennsylvania State College, February, 1929, and used by permission of the Dean of the Graduate College of that institution.)

THIS paper is a brief summary of the thesis written in partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Master's Degree from Pennsylvania State College in February, 1929. Because of its brevity we can present only the general conclusions which the results of our study seem to justify. The sources of our data are: first, observation of one hundred twenty-six children from the ages of five to nineteen referred for speech correction over a period of five years; second, conferences with intelligent blind adults; and third, a comparison of the ratings of thirty blind children with the ratings of a control group of one thousand unselected school children reported by Lewis M. Terman in his "Genetic Studies of Genius," Vol. I.¹

Perkins Institution and the writer appreciate this opportunity of presenting a problem from our particular field of speech correction, because it is to the highest interest of blind children to have their problems intelligently and sympathetically understood by the thinking public. Our field is distinctive only in that we are concerned with children handicapped by total or partial blindness and the conditions consequent to it. This does not necessarily imply a correlation between blindness *per se* and defective speech; although surveys made by Dr. Sara M. Stinchfield² in two residential schools for the blind show a higher percentage of speech defects among the pupils of these schools than among seeing children of the same age and school grade. This can probably be explained in terms of other factors which are not pertinent to the present study. The fact of immediate importance is that, to blind children, speech defects are added disabilities and as such accentuate the more serious handicap of blindness and its effects.

¹ L. Terman — *Genetic Studies of Genius*, Vol. I, Stanford University Press, 1926.
² S. M. Stinchfield — *Speech Pathology*, P. 80-82 Expression Co., Boston, 1928.

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And we do actually find cases of speech disturbance in which blindness is a major determining factor, because as a handicap it is productive of a number of significant mental attitudes which, in some instances, are evidenced by speech disorders. This brings us to our problem, the Psychology of Blindness in Relation to Personality.

Among the various definitions of personality, perhaps the following is the most inclusive in spite of its brevity. "Personality is the sum total of an individual's being."³ This definition might lead to the assumption that the physical organism, as such, is an integral part of personality, which, in turn, would lead to the questionable conclusion that an individual with a defective physical organism must necessarily have an inadequate personality. The physical organism as such is not an integral part of personality, but it is a vital factor in determining its growth and development. It is, moreover, a medium for the expression of personality.

Blindness is significant in relation to personality because: first, it interferes with physical activity and decreases the sources of possible stimuli; second, it increases nervous and physical strain; third, it tends to thwart wish fulfillment; fourth, it makes the person so handicapped the exceptional member of his group.

The congenitally blind baby comes into the world with the endowments common to all infants; — the same mental and physical organization with its innate tendencies and capacities. Nature did not modify the organism to fit his handicap; neither did she place him in a world designed for handicapped people. Since she made no such provisions we have our problem.

Blindness in itself does not incapacitate a child for physical activity, but it brings about conditions conducive to inactivity. Since he lacks visual stimuli the blind child is deprived of one of the chief incentives to activity in early childhood. Unless encouragement and substitute stimuli to activity are provided he will tend to become passive and listless or he may develop tics and mannerisms.

The case of L. shows the effects of thwarted and misdirected activity. L., a girl who had been permitted to sit idly rocking, talking, and making faces, but without definite occupation, entered school at the age of eleven with low vitality and lack of emotional control evidenced by fits of temper, tics, and a severe stutter. As she learned to enjoy a normal active life these symptoms gradually disappeared. Her stutter responded to persistent treatment — averaging four short conferences a week over a period of two school years.

³ Valentine — *Psychology of Personality*, P. 21. D. Appleton Co., N. Y., 1922.

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Blindness is responsible for more significant inhibitions than its interference with mere physical activity. It tends to thwart fulfillment of some of the most fundamental urges and desires. Among the most potent of these are the need for new experience or variety of stimuli and the desire for status or recognition within one's group.

It is claimed by some educators of the blind that the lack of sight increases rather than decreases the need for diversion, recreation and new and varied experiences. However, the handicap brings about conditions conducive to monotony rather than to variety of activity. Not infrequently we find children whose desire for new experience finds satisfaction in phantasy, daydreams, and even in misconduct.

C., a thoroughly normal boy, had a severe stutter which we attribute, at least in part, to emotional conflict in his attempts to adjust to conditions under which strong normal desires could not be satisfied.

This does not mean that blind persons in general lack variety of interests and experiences and resort to abnormal substitutes, but securing them is a very real problem for a number of important reasons, one of which is fairly obvious. The realization of their handicap and its effects creates in many blind persons active feelings of inferiority. This makes it difficult for them to establish and maintain social contacts, and cuts them off from a life of varied interests. Of course, the desire for status also fails of satisfaction in the presence of the inferiority complex.

Blindness increases nervous and physical strain because it makes most forms of motor activity much more difficult, so that a disproportionate amount of energy must be expended in their performance. The strain is indicated by a marked nervous and muscular tension. Practically every child referred for speech correction is in need of exercises for relaxation. In fact, in some instances the tension is so severe that it seems to be the chief cause of the speech defect.

The essence of the problem may be expressed in the statement that the blind person is the exceptional member of his group. We find that the children whose early environment has induced them to regard themselves as exceptional because of their handicap tend to be introspective and egocentric. This condition favors the development of an inferiority complex which is occasionally transformed by compensation into an attitude of superiority. Because blind children are the exceptional members of their families they are frequently encouraged to remain infantile. This fact accounts for the common occurrence of "baby talk" among bright blind children of five, six,

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and seven years of age. The inferiority complex is probably the most important determining factor in the personality problems of persons without vision. Its presence is indicated by the usual symptoms, shyness, dissatisfaction, bitterness, and various attempts at compensation.

B., a girl of seventeen, referred for treatment for a severe stutter, suffered from feelings of inferiority because she was considered by her mother a social liability. Her compensatory mechanism took the form of emotional fixations on older women. The stutter was the result of her emotional conflicts.

Every year cases are referred for speech whose primary difficulties are problems of personality of which the speech disturbances seem to be conspicuous symptoms.

The fundamental principle of any therapy is to remove the cause of the malady. This cannot, of course, be done for the blind. However, one very effective means of minimizing the trouble, is to remove all remediable defects. This is the first step toward the achievement of satisfactory compensation which psychology favors as the most frequent cure for the effects of handicaps and disabilities.

TERMAN TRAIT LIST FOR MENTAL, MORAL, AND PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS*

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 Health | 14 Sensitiveness to Approval, etc. |
| 2 Physical Energy | 15 Desire to Excel |
| 3 Prudence, etc. | 16 Freedom from Vanity |
| 4 Self-confidence | 17 Sympathy, etc. |
| 5 Will and Persistence | 18 Generosity, etc. |
| 6 Musical Appreciation | 19 Conscientiousness |
| 7 Appreciation of Beauty | 20 Truthfulness |
| 8 Sense of Humor | 21 Mechanical Ingenuity |
| 9 Cheerfulness, etc. | 22 Desire to Know |
| 10 Permanence of Moods | 23 Originality |
| 11 Fondness for Groups | 24 Common Sense |
| 12 Leadership | 25 General Intelligence |
| 13 Popularity | 26 Combined Traits |

System of Rating.

Very superior
Decidedly above average
Rather above average
Average
Below average
Decidedly below average

Degree of certainty.

Very certain
Fairly certain
Rather uncertain

*GENETIC STUDIES OF GENIUS. VOL. I. L. TERMAN
Stanford University Press, California, 1926.

SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF BLINDNESS

On the whole the statistical part of our study neither confirms nor refutes the conclusions based upon observation of children and conferences with teachers. The method employed was to have thirty blind children rated by the writer and the child's teacher, using Terman's list of twenty-five physical, mental, moral and social traits. The results were collected in groups by sexes, tabulated to show the medians and standard deviations in comparison with Terman's results for one thousand unselected school children. The percent of blind children rated at or above Terman's medians was calculated for each trait, and correlations were made by Spearman's rank method to show the relation of the teacher's judgments to those of the writer.

In almost all the traits these correlations were high enough to indicate that teacher and writer were fairly in accord in their impressions of the children, but the wide differences in ratings on some traits and the decided superiority of the boys to the girls in most traits and their superiority to Terman's group in many, make one think that this rating method has raised more questions than it answers. One can perhaps say that there is evidence here also of an interference with physical activity (low in "health" and "physical energy"), of the decrease in sources of possible stimuli (low in "appreciation of beauty"), of an increase in nervous and physical strain (high on "prudence", "permanence of moods", and "sensitiveness to approval"), of the thwarting of wish fulfillment (low in "will and persistence", "desire to excel", and "generosity") with an over-compensation (very high in "musical appreciation", high in "self confidence", "vanity", and "general intelligence") and of the statement that blindness makes one an exceptional member of the group (low in "fondness for groups", in "sympathy", "generosity", and "truthfulness"). But all these indications must be considered highly tentative and subject to further correction.

A second table was formed to show these ratings combined in a five-fold classification; — intellectual, volitional, emotional, moral and social.

On the intellectual traits the blind boys and girls rank practically the same as Terman's control group. On the volitional traits also the two groups are approximately the same. On the emotional traits the blind boys are the same as the control girls while the blind girls are lower than either. On the moral traits the control girls and boys rank first and second and the blind children fall third. This may be explained by the fact that many of the thirty children were rated average on these traits. On the social traits, also, the blind

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children rank third. This is to be expected because, as we have seen, blindness is a social handicap. The control girls and the blind girls rank first and second on the physical traits while the fifteen blind boys are third.

A third table showed the degree of relationship between ratings of the children by the psychologist and a teacher. On the whole, the probable errors indicate that the results are fairly reliable.

A fourth table showed the percentage of blind children who equalled or exceeded the control group. More than twenty-five percent of the boys equal or exceed Terman's group in all traits except truthfulness and freedom from vanity. Between seventy-five and eighty-seven percent equal or exceed in musical appreciation, prudence and forethought, permanence of mood, popularity with other children, sensitiveness to approval, desire to know, and general intelligence. More than twenty-five percent of the girls equal or exceed the control group in all but ten of the twenty-five traits. Between seventy-five and one hundred per cent. equal or exceed in only two traits, — musical appreciation, one hundred per cent., and general intelligence eighty per cent. according to the psychologist's ratings which were based upon the results of the Binet tests, and seventy-three per cent. according to the teacher's ratings.

This comparison of thirty children with one thousand children does not justify sweeping conclusions regarding the psychology of blindness. It merely indicates certain trends, some of which we have suggested.

Our study then seems to indicate that blindness is to be reckoned with as a personality factor because: first, it interferes with normal physical activity and limits the sources of stimuli; second, it thwarts wish fulfillment; third, it increases nervous and physical strain; and fourth, it makes the individual the exceptional member of his group.

Blindness accentuates certain personality traits, but according to our findings it does not produce any distinct types of personality.

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